

ROLE OF THE FIRE PROTECTION AGENCY *

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I AM speaking to you today in a dual capacity, both as a representative of the State Fire Marshal's Office of California and as chairman of the Committee on Wearing Apparel of the National Fire Protection Association of Boston, Mass. This is quite appropriate, because in my admittedly biased opinion these two agencies have been by far the most active of all groups attempting to solve the clothing fire problem in behalf of the public.

In 1945 the State of California enacted the first legislation of its kind in this field. The legislature passed a law that expressed concern over the hazards of flammable clothing, and directed the state fire marshal to conduct research and establish reasonable regulations to protect the citizens of the state.

In undertaking this program of research, we found that the only group actively engaged in similar work was the American Association of Textile Chemists and Colorists. The AATCC, an industry-oriented organization, was most cooperative and helpful, and we worked closely with it in the development of our standards and regulations, which were put into effect on January 6, 1947.

These regulations, while of quite limited scope, were of inestimable value just 5 years later when the great so-called "torch sweater" uproar occurred. The extremely hazardous nature and the widespread sale of these sweaters were first discovered by our office in Los Angeles in December 1951.

At that time we were the only governmental agency in the country

*Based on a paper presented at the *Conference on Burns and Flame-Retardant Fabrics*, held at The New York Academy of Medicine, December 2 and 3, 1966. The conference was sponsored by: the New York and Brooklyn Trauma Committee of the American College of Surgeons, Chicago, Ill.; The National Fire Protection Association, Boston, Mass.; the Section on Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery of The New York Academy of Medicine; and the Division of Accident Prevention of the U. S. Public Health Service, Washington, D. C. The conference was held in cooperation with the American Academy of Pediatrics, Evanston, Ill.; the American Public Health Association, New York, N. Y.; and the National Safety Council, Chicago, Ill.; and was supported by a grant from the U. S. Public Health Service.

in a position to take direct legal action against the vendors, which we did with considerable success. However, our first and most vigorous response was to warn the public through all available news media regarding these dangerous articles. The resulting publicity soon reached nationwide proportions. Not only did this publicity greatly increase public awareness of the hazards of flammable clothing, but it also attracted the attention of Congress and was no doubt largely responsible for passage of the Federal Flammable Fabrics Act in 1953.

Meanwhile the National Fire Protection Association had been contemplating the formation of a Committee on Wearing Apparel, and had been actively interested in our work in California. Again, the sweater episode probably furnished the necessary impetus to hasten decision, and the committee was officially established early in 1952.

As with all committees of the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), the Committee on Wearing Apparel is made up of persons providing a well-balanced representation of all the broad interests concerned with clothing-fire safety. Present membership includes four persons from the fire services, three from insurance companies, two from retail merchants or associations, five from the textile fiber or fabric industry, one each from the National Safety Council and the National Bureau of Standards, and two from the medical profession. The last are Dr. Carl A. Moyer of the Michigan Technological University, and Dr. Robert Trimby, representing the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Over the years, the Committee's work has been marked by some rather vigorous controversy and dissension. In 1953 the textile industry fostered the promulgation by the U.S. Department of Commerce of a Commercial Standard, CS 191-53, *Flammability of Clothing Textiles*. This later was incorporated as the reference standard in the Federal Flammable Fabrics Act.

The basic disagreement on the NFPA Committee has been primarily between industry and fire service representatives as to the adequacy of the Commercial Standard. Over objections made by industry, both in and out of the committee, NFPA Standard No. 702 was adopted in 1962, incorporating several significant differences from the Commercial Standard. The disagreement continues, but apparently we are no longer fighting a lonely battle. The federal law and the Commercial Standard are currently undergoing close scrutiny by both Congress

and the U.S. Department of Commerce.

Initial activities of the committee stressed research on the burning properties of textiles and fibers, and the development of appropriate test methods and a recommended safety standard. We also endeavored to collect detailed information regarding clothing-fire incidents, and we compiled statistical data from many case histories.

Currently, the primary effort of our committee is to foster and encourage a vigorous program of public education regarding the hazards of flammable clothing. We are convinced that therein lies the only hope for an immediate, significant reduction in clothing-fire casualties. More restrictive legislation, even if attainable, can be of only very limited value in solving the over-all problem. There is much hope for the future in increased usage of existing or still-to-be-discovered inherently flame-resistant synthetic fibers, and in improved techniques for providing durable flame resistance by chemical processes. But for now, the immediate and tragic problem is that *the great bulk of our population simply is not aware that clothing can burn.*

The scope of the effort which any fire protection agency can devote toward reducing the number of clothing-fire casualties must depend of course on the size of the organization, available time, manpower, and budget. The problem is highly complex, and the scope of activities can be very broad. It is vitally important, however, that every fire protection agency of whatever size, even down to the one-man Volunteer Fire Department should try to do at least two things:

First, it should investigate all clothing-fire accidents. It is not enough for us to know just that the clothes people wear are catching fire. We need to know who, how, why, what, where, and when. More specifically, we need to know the age and sex of the victim, his physical and mental condition, detailed circumstances of the accident, the source of ignition, the type of fabric and style of garment, and what action was taken by the victim or others at the time. All remaining clothing of the victim should be retained for testing whenever possible.

Second, every agency should carry on a continuing and effective program of public education. We must succeed in making almost 200 million people much more aware than they are now that much of the common, everyday clothing in wide general use is readily flammable. This is a great challenge and a most difficult assignment, because there is tremendous competition for the public's attention. However, there is

only one alternative, and I am sure you will agree that it is unacceptable. The alternative is to continue to tolerate about 2,000 fatalities annually from the ignition of clothing, and to continue to fill untold thousands of hospital beds with critically burned victims.

We in the fire service like to believe that we are making some progress in the field of fire prevention, but there are still far too many fire casualties, and our failures, when they survive, become your patients. Clothing fires account for thousands of these patients, and many of you have decided to practice preventive medicine by enlisting yourselves directly in this aspect of fire prevention work. We fervently welcome and applaud this decision.